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# Ethnic Mobilization in Post-Soviet Georgia: The Case of the Yezidi-Kurds

David Szakonyi

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the failure of the Yezidi-Kurdish minority to attain a high level of ethnic mobilization in order to protect its political and cultural interests after the fall of the USSR and the creation of an independent Georgia in 1991. This inability has intensified the threat of the complete cultural, religious, and linguistic assimilation of the Yezidi-Kurds into the wider Georgian society, instead of allowing the minority to achieve healthy integration into society and the preservation of its ethnic identity. I argue that the convergence of three sets of factors best explains the present tenuous position of the minority. First, structural changes affected the ability of minority leaders to gather sufficient human and financial resources necessary for mobilization. Secondly, problems in determining a unified identity as well as conflicts between minority elites prevented the consolidation of the ethnic group and limited its organizational capacity. Lastly, Georgian state policies and larger societal trends have subtly contributed to the dismantling of certain core components of the Yezidi-Kurdish ethnic identity, thereby accelerating the process of assimilation. This article concludes with a discussion of the prospects of the Yezidi-Kurdish community in Georgia, arguing that only efforts to reunite the minority and cooperate with existing minority civil society structures will prevent the effective disappearance of the group in this country.

## Introduction

As a unique ethnicity with its own religion, societal structure, and cultural heritage, the Yezidi-Kurdish minority is a primary example of the diversity of populations living in Georgia.<sup>1</sup> Settling in the country over the past three centuries, the community has grown to substantial numbers in the past fifty years, reaching a peak of over 33,000 members in 1989 and notable Kurdish cultural development in the modern world. However, after the fall of the USSR, the Yezidi-Kurdish minority in Georgia has struggled to preserve many of its cultural traditions, remain united, and protect its political and cultural interests. The risks currently facing the minority concern not only out-migration due to strenuous economic difficulties of the post-Soviet period in Georgia, upon which the community can be reestablished in other countries. Instead of being able to integrate into Georgian society while simultaneously preserving the Yezidi-Kurdish identity, this national

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, the term 'Yezidi-Kurd' will be used to describe the ethnic minority, with 'Yezidi' signifying the faith of the group, and the word 'Kurd' signifying its cultural features. Muslim Kurds were mostly deported from Georgia during the Stalinist period. Therefore, the attention in this paper will be paid to the Yezidi-Kurdish population, with references where applicable to other Muslim Kurds who have historically lived in Georgia.

minority is now confronted with the complete loss of traditions, language, and identity under the weight of assimilation processes.<sup>2</sup>

To explain this decline, three sets of factors will be examined that have affected the Yezidi-Kurds' failure to achieve a high level of ethnic mobilization to press for their interests and strengthen the community in Georgia. First, a series of structural changes to the economic and politics systems of Georgia after 1991, by causing the out-migration of large numbers of Yezidi-Kurds, significantly decreased the human and financial resources available to minority leaders wishing to solidify and strengthen the community. Secondly, infighting, conflicting ambitions, and a lack of consensus on self-identification among the community itself has weakened its organizational capacity and ethnic solidarity. Lastly, state-building and societal processes at work in independent Georgia has promoted a Georgian national identity that in many ways has not encouraged diversity within Georgian society.

This article will begin with brief explanations of the religion, societal structure, and history of the Yezidi-Kurdish ethnicity in Georgia, in order to emphasize those aspects pivotal for an analysis of the decline of the community. The specificity of the ethnic group and the unique traditions involved with the corresponding faith create a particular case for integration that must be studied separately. Next, under current theories of ethnic mobilization, I will trace the experiences and choices made by the community since the fall of the Soviet Union as well as the larger processes of assimilation which have prevented the proper integration of the community into Georgian society.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the case of the construction of the Yezidi-Kurdish Cultural Centre will be given to illustrate the conjecture of the three sets of factors on the failure of the community to achieve one of its primary objectives. Research for the article was largely conducted through interviews with Yezidi-Kurdish minority leaders, spiritual figures as well as representatives of the community at large. Relevant academic literature, newspaper articles, and non-government

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<sup>2</sup> Here I draw a difference between the words 'integration' and 'assimilation.' Integration here signifies the acceptance of a civic identity of the majority culture in the intentional adoption of its language, norms, and customs while maintaining one's separate ethnic identity and traditions (i.e. the creation of a dual or hyphenated identity). Assimilation as used in this article signifies the complete acceptance of the dominant culture without the maintenance of one's previous minority identity.

<sup>3</sup> Zoltan Barany's prerequisites of political opportunities, ethnic identity, leadership, organizational capacity, ideology, financial resources, communications, and symbols, were used to direct the discussion, but this article will not specifically test the saliency and weight of each in turn. As stated above, the Yezidi-Kurdish case does not directly parallel other ethnic mobilization processes, and the analysis laid out here will attempt to join the existing theories and the specificities of the ethnicity to arrive at individual conclusions. Zoltan Barany, "Ethnic Mobilization Without Prerequisites: The East European Gypsies", 54 *World Politics* (2002), 277-307.

organization (NGO) reports were also reviewed to provide a background of the current situation of the Yezidi-Kurdish minority in Georgia.

## **Brief History of the Yezidi-Kurdish Population in Georgia**

### **Religion and Society**

The Yezidi religion is one of the oldest religions in the world - over 5,000 years old by some estimates. Due to its development in the Middle East, it has been strongly influenced by many other world faiths, such as Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism and has incorporated beliefs and practices from each. The centrality of the religion within the Yezidi-Kurdish ethnic identity cannot be understated; when a member leaves the religion, for example by being baptized, he also ceases to be ethnically Yezidi. The inextricability of the religion and ethnicity has helped to preserve the group over the centuries. The faith itself holds the view that all things in the universe are united under one God, for example, day and night, good and evil. This God has sent angels to protect and watch over the Earth. By not accepting a duality between God and the Devil, the Yezidis' worship of the main archangel Melek Taus has historically led to the outside misinterpretation of the faith as 'devil-worshippers.' The main temple of the religion is found in Lalish, in northern Iraq, near the town of Mosul. The number of followers is placed at around one million worldwide.<sup>4</sup>

Yezidi-Kurdish society is strictly governed by a nonhierarchical caste system, divided into two spiritual castes (Pir and Sheikh) and one mass caste (Murid). Castes are then subdivided into numerous subcastes, each with their own functions within Yezidi-Kurdish society. Each member of the society (including Pirs and Sheikhs themselves) has his or her own specific Pirs and Sheikhs to turn to for spiritual or other guidance. Marriages outside of the ethnic group are traditionally forbidden, as well as marriages outside one's subcaste. The endogamous nature of the ethnicity makes it impossible for one to become a Yezidi-Kurd other than through birth. Therefore proselytizing the faith to outsiders is forbidden, although this aspect of the faith places obstacles to expansion of the constituency outside normal patterns of procreation. Yezidi-Kurds

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<sup>4</sup> Yezidi-Kurds need to be distinguished from Muslim Kurds who comprise the vast majority of the 27-30 million members of the Kurdish ethnicity. Living primarily in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, Muslim Kurds once migrated in smaller numbers to the Caucasus, but either were deported to Central Asia during the Soviet era or returned to the Middle East over the past century. See Lamara Pashaeva, "Yezidi Social Life in the CIS", *ArmenianDiaspora.com*, November 2004, at <http://www.armeniandiaspora.com/forum/showthread.php?t=12221>

speak a northern dialect of the Kurdish language called Kurmanji, which exists also in a written form.

### **Migration and Resettlement in Georgia**

The first contacts between the Kurdish minority and Georgia occurred sometime in the eighth and ninth centuries. Muslim Kurdish dynasties in modern day Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey maintained variable contacts with their Georgian counterparts, varying from peaceful trading to periodic conflicts. Kurdish workers also arrived in Tbilisi for seasonal work in this early period, but as the power of the Muslim Kurdish empires declined, a more consistent migration of Kurds to Georgia was delayed by several centuries. Two legendary Yezidi-Kurdish brothers – Ivane and Zakaria Mkhargrdzeli – occupied powerful positions within the Georgian court in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Their military and political achievements under the reign of Queen Tamara also facilitated the first large-scale migration of Kurdish tribes to the Caucasus. However, most of the migrants who arrived at this time later adopted Orthodox Christianity and completely assimilated into Georgian society.<sup>6</sup>

The first massive wave of Yezidi-Kurdish immigration to Georgia began in the late eighteenth century. Looking for protection from Persian and Ottoman threats, the Georgian king of Kartli and Kakheti, Erekle II appealed to Yezidi-Kurdish leaders in eastern Turkey for military assistance in return for the right to govern territory within the kingdom. Although the agreement broke down due to failed negotiations with third-party Russia, some 4,000 Yezidi-Kurdish families were still brought to Tbilisi under the patronage of the Georgian king. The later incorporation of Georgia into the Russian empire also resulted in the mass migration of thousands of Yezidi-Kurds into the country. Upon victory in the Russian-Persian Wars of 1804-13 and 1826-28, the Crimean War (1853-56), and the Russia-Turkey War (1877-78), the Russian Empire took over large swaths of territory inhabited by Yezidi-Kurds. The opportunity to relocate farther from the Persian and Ottoman empires, which had regularly pressured the Yezidi-Kurds to convert to Islam, was used by over 300,000 families, moving to the Russian Empire by the end of

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<sup>5</sup> Dmitri Pirbari, “Kurds in the South Caucasus”, January 2006 [in Russian], at <http://www.nplg.gov/ic/orient/HIstoty/24.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Iraklii Chikhladze and Giga Chikhladze, “The Yezidi Kurds and Assyrians of Georgia: The Problem of Diasporas and Integration into Contemporary Society”, 21 *Central Asia & the Caucasus* (2003).

the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In Georgia specifically, Yezidi-Kurds mainly settled in the larger cities of Telavi and Tbilisi, while several Muslim Kurds tribes also moved into villages in Meskheta (Samtskhe-Javakheti) and Ajara during this period. Early Kurdish settlers in Georgia were mainly engaged in working on the land and cattle breeding.

In the early twentieth century, several thousand Yezidi-Kurdish families also resettled into Georgia, but this time due to severe persecution at the hands of the Turks. With the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty to end World War I, Russia handed over lands it had taken over in the previous century back to Turkey. The massacres of Armenians which began in 1915 in these areas also targeted the Yezidi-Kurdish population, who sometimes banded together with Armenian troops, but ultimately were forced to flee northward into the Caucasus.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of Yezidi-Kurds travelled through Armenia to Georgia, where they settled in the old neighbourhoods of Tbilisi, as well as Telavi, Tsnori, Kvareli, Tianeti, and Batumi. In the 1950s, Yezidi-Kurds who had previously settled in Armenia during the genocide also resettled in Georgia, mainly in order to find better job opportunities.

### **Life during the Soviet period**

During the two main waves of immigration mentioned above, Yezidi-Kurds arrived mostly illiterate and therefore occupied employment positions mainly at the bottom of the social ladder. Their housing conditions reflected their lack of education, as Yezidi-Kurds took up residence in the basements of apartment buildings. Soviet authorities tried to change the living situation of the group, by introducing mandatory primary education and providing them with normal apartments. University quotas were set up to ensure places in higher institutions for talented Yezidi-Kurdish children, even for those who may not have passed entrance exams. However, Yezidi-Kurds mainly worked in manual labour occupations during the Soviet period, cleaning streets and transporting goods, earning them the negative label of being solely ‘street-cleaners’. Living in the major cities increased contact between Yezidi-Kurds and the host Georgians. Yezidi-Kurds, beginning in the Soviet period, began to attend both Russian and Georgian schools, and thus had

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Association of Georgia, "Kurdish Population in Georgia – January-November 2004 Assessment", *Country of Origin Information Reports* 1(3) (Tbilisi, United Nations Association of Georgia), 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Pirbari, "Kurds in the South Caucasus".

amicable relations with Georgian society throughout the Soviet period.<sup>9</sup> However, Muslim Kurds from southern Georgia were almost completely deported to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, along with the Meskhetian Turks and other Muslim groups in November 1944, as part of Stalin's preventive measures to empty the regions along the external borders of the Soviet Union from population that potentially might be sympathetically disposed towards the neighbouring states, in this case Turkey.

Stemming partly out of a desire to undermine Turkey's internal politics and partly out of a concern for the preservation of ethnic cultures, Soviet authorities also fostered a warm environment for Yezidi-Kurdish cultural development.<sup>10</sup> Financial assistance was given to the community to found the only Kurdish theatre in the world, form dance ensembles, broadcast radio programmes in the Kurdish language, and publish famous Kurdish literary works. Nine schools had a Kurdish language faculty, beginning in the 1960s. This privileged treatment ensured the survival and vitality of Yezidi-Kurdish culture throughout the Soviet period.

### **Structural Changes and Their Effects on the Community**

The fall of the USSR in 1991 led to significant changes in the political, social, and economic environment of the newly independent republic of Georgia. Civil wars in the early 1990s coupled with economic stagnation due to leftover inefficient economic structures from the Soviet era created an acute economic situation for all members of Georgian society, including those of national minorities. The period following independence was marked by mass waves of out-migration beyond the borders of Georgia, which finally were opened to the outside world after decades of isolation under the Communist regime. Furthermore, many of the state services developed by Soviet authorities withered away under the newly introduced capitalist system which saw a far more limited role for the state in the promotion of minority culture.

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Association of Georgia *Country of Origin Information Reports* 1 (3), "Kurdish Population in Georgia – January-November 2004 Assessment". (Tbilisi, United Nations Association of Georgia), 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Turkey, a NATO member, has a large Kurdish population, mostly Muslim, in its south-western corner on the borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria. Over the past decades radical Kurds have waged a guerrilla war against the state. Some observers have concluded that Soviet support for the Yezidi-Kurdish population in the USSR were linked with attempts to destabilize the political situation in Turkey, by promoting an international sense of Kurdish pride.

The Yezidi-Kurdish minority during this time period experienced a substantial loss of population, mostly due to migration to Russia, countries of Western Europe, and North America. According to the 1989 Soviet census, the population of Yezidi-Kurds was put at 33,331; thirteen years later in 2002, the Georgian census counted 18,329 persons self-identifying as Yezidis and 2,514 persons self-identifying as Kurds, a decline of 37%.<sup>11</sup> The lack of economic opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers propelled the migration processes. The collapsing economy provided little hope for a sustained future for Yezidis in Georgia, and many people turned their attention abroad. Such a drastic loss of population has had several considerable effects on the remaining community and its efforts to unite and mobilize in post-Soviet pluralist Georgia.

At this point, an important consideration to be made concerns who out of the community actually left. Given the desperate economic situation in post independence Georgia, only families with savings or adequate financial means could afford the expensive trip out of the country. For the Yezidis, this often meant the departure of some of the most prominent businessmen and leaders of the community. For those who were left behind and struggled to build civil society organizations that could represent their interests within a now pluralist society, the loss of important and wealthy figures deprived the community of important financial resources, especially as funding from the state for national minorities was withdrawn under the systemic pressures affecting the newly independent Georgian government. Remittances helped assuage many of the financial difficulties of the average Yezidi-Kurd in Georgia, but these were not enough for the flourishing of the organizations created towards the end of the Soviet period. Yezidi-Kurdish minority leaders struggled in their attempts to find new sources of funding for the building of organizations and continued financing of older institutions from the Soviet era.

Next, being an endogamous community that reproduces itself solely upon relations within the circumscribed caste system, the loss of over a third of the Yezidi-Kurd population undeniably had an impact on the preservation of central cultural traditions and ethnic solidarity. For example, every Yezidi-Kurd is assigned his or her own Sheik and Pir to act as spiritual mentors, and even within the community each member of the spiritual caste plays a designated role in advising about certain problems. Out-migration significantly affected the ratio of spiritual caste members to members of the mass caste, the Murids. In time, they were simply less spiritual leaders for the

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<sup>11</sup>Due to a request by the group Centre for Yezid Traditions “Ra Zibun,” the classifications ‘Yezidi’ and ‘Kurd’ were used separately in the 2002 census. See the section on ‘Self-Identity’ for further explanations on the debate over naming. Soviet Census 1989 at [http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng\\_nac\\_89.php?reg=6](http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_89.php?reg=6); Georgian Census 2002 at <http://www.statistics.ge/main.php?pform=145&plang=1>



wider Yezidi-Kurd population, making it harder to uphold religious traditions and pass them on to younger traditions.

Not having a central place of worship, Yezidi members of the spiritual caste have historically visited the individual homes of the wider population. In return, Yezidis would offer small amounts of money and/or food to Sheikhs and Pirs. However, according to several Yezidi-Kurds, these visits became more infrequent in the early 1990s as members of the broader community had less to offer the spiritual figures. One Yezidi-Kurd woman even commented that she and her family felt embarrassed in their inability to ‘repay’ the Sheikh for a ceremony he performed in her apartment. As such, relationships between the spiritual castes and mass castes declined and religious practices have slowly faded away, creating a vacuum in the spiritual life of Yezidi-Kurds and making other religions more attractive.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also changed the opportunities available to the Yezidi-Kurdish community, especially with regards to the social and cultural institutions that bound the group together. The state-enforced funding for ethnic minorities could simply not be continued under the economic turmoil of the early 1990s in Georgia. The Kurdish theatre closed in 1992, dance ensembles slowly withered away, and Kurds in general lost public spaces to gather and organize cultural functions. On the surface, these developments seemly merely unfortunate from a cultural standpoint, but for the self-dependent Yezidi-Kurdish community, the loss of meeting places affected the previously high level of community interaction that was present during the Soviet period. By not living in compact settlements but instead scattered across large cities in Tbilisi, Yezidi-Kurds generally lost contact with one another, not aided by the failure of communal organizations to perform their uniting role (see below).

Therefore, the factors listed above have negatively affected the tradition of marrying within one’s subcaste, an important component of the Yezidi religious tradition. First, mass migrations decreased the number of Yezidi-Kurds remaining in Georgia. With fewer members of subcastes to choose from, strict marriages within the caste structure have also sharply declined. Furthermore, without means to find other members of one’s subcaste (such as gathering spaces, organized events, etc.) and lower levels of community interaction, young Yezidi-Kurds have more frequently married outside of the community.

According to the religious tradition, once a Yezidi-Kurd marries outside his subcaste, s/he is no longer considered a member of the ethnicity. S/he can no longer participate in any religious rituals, attend weddings, and is generally shunned by older, more faithful spiritual leaders. Endogamous marriage practices can play a very important role in strengthening identification with an ethnicity and maintaining a high level of ethnic solidarity. However, under the strict and closed system of the Yezidi faith, transgressions of these marriage customs have decreased the population of the minority even further and weakened the sense of collectivity of the ethnic group.<sup>12</sup>

One might pose the question of why ardently religious parents would allow their children to pursue love as the expense of ethnic belonging. Interviews with community members provide some insight into the thinking of parents dealing with children who wish to enter mixed marriages. One Yezidi-Kurdish woman stated that she simply couldn't refuse her daughter the right to follow her own choices and pursue her own life. The conservative traditions simply could not be upheld within a society that prides the equal rights of all. Therefore, many of the self-imposed boundaries that have kept the Yezidi faith alive for centuries are now crumbling under the pressure of globalization and Western values. A second Yezidi-Kurdish man offered a similar scenario, in which his son wanted to marry a Yezidi-Kurd who had been baptized. Although silently distraught by the proceedings, the father consented to the marriage, but demanded that the children of the couple take the Yezidi faith, which is passed on through the father. Commenting on the situation, the father stated that again he couldn't deny his son, but wanted to find a compromise in order to save the community from self-destruction. The examples of similar decisions are now numerous.

In the end, economic deterioration and the unavailability of work led many Yezidi-Kurds who could not migrate to rethink their choices in upbringing the next generation. To illustrate, upon achieving independence, the new state authorities declared the Georgian language to be the new official state language. Although Yezidi-Kurds have maintained a respectable command of the Georgian language due to living mainly in large cities and interacting frequently and warmly with Georgian citizens, the overall decline in living standards changed Yezidi-Kurds' approach to the language issue. Suddenly, the question was not to prepare one's children for a future life in Georgia that might not bear opportunities, but instead to send one's child to Russian schools in

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<sup>12</sup> For more on ethnic solidarity, see Francois Nielsen, "Towards a Theory of Ethnic Solidarity in Modern Societies", 50 *American Sociological Review* (1995), 133-149.

order to prepare him or her for work in Russia. Thus, many Yezidi-Kurd children never attended Georgian schools in the 1990s during the nadir of the economic situation. As such, the tenuous economic situation induced Yezidi-Kurdish parents to respond by preparing their children for a future abroad, thereby contributing to the desires of the younger generations to migrate later on. Because of this, departures have held steady even after the crises have subsided.

Therefore, the tumultuous environment of post-Soviet Georgia had drastic consequences for the Yezidi-Kurdish people. Mass migrations damaged the financial base of nascent civil society organizations and complicated attempts to preserve religious traditions, whether through the practice of rituals with spiritual leaders or through traditional intra-caste marriage. The cessation of state funding for cultural institutions deprived the community of needed public spaces to gather and keep much-needed endogamous marriage practices alive. Lastly, choices to educate their children in the Russian language made by the Yezidi-Kurd minority in light of economic crises in the 1990s gave little reason for the younger generations to stay in Georgia without sufficient knowledge of the state language. The community as a whole was diminishing in numbers and in its adherence to the traditions that had ensured its survival over the years.

### **A Lack of Internal Unity**

The drastic opening of the political arena after the fall of the Soviet Union changed the political requirements of national minorities in Georgia. Not only was previous state funding and support of culture severed due to the economic crisis and changing political priorities, but the new pluralistic system of democracy applied pressure on minorities to form ‘ethnic interest groups’ to assure their collective rights within the newly independent government and society. Therefore, what emerged was a new form of competition for valued resources which resulted in increased ethnic mobilization. The Yezidi-Kurds were not immune from such demands and attempted to coalesce to build the organizations needed to represent the community effectively. However, significant problems emerged in both the development of these groups and the strengthening of ethnic solidarity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wilkes and Okamoto argue that rifts in political systems and the breaking down of barriers increase competition between ethnic groups and accelerate ethnic mobilization. See Rima Wilkes and Dina Okamoto, “Ethnic Competition and Mobilization by Minorities at Risk”, 8 *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* (2002), 1-23.

### **Self-identity**

A significant problem for the Yezidi-Kurdish minority has been the debate over how to call themselves. The word 'Yezidi' signifies the Yezidi faith, which as seen above, is the fundamental component of the ethnic identity. Accordingly, the word 'Kurd' corresponds with the cultural part of the identity, including customs, language, and historical origins. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, Yezidi-Kurds primarily used solely the term 'Kurd' to self-identify, even though the word encompasses both Muslim and Yezidi believers. Starting in 1915, the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks also affected the Yezidi-Kurd population living in eastern Turkey. Astonishingly, Muslim Kurds participated in the bloodshed against Yezidi-Kurds, and since that time, most Yezidis in the Caucasus have preferred to shed that part of their appellation due to its connection with the violence. In the later part of the twentieth century, many members of the community have returned to referring to themselves as Kurds, largely due to the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East with the establishment of a Kurdish enclave within Iraq.

As a result, most people in the minority have settled upon the two word name, Yezidi-Kurd, as the best way of bridging the divide. The temporary solution in lieu of a substantive debate on the preferred name only reveals the larger problem within Yezidi-Kurdish society – the lack of consensus and unity, especially on something as primary as self-naming. Disagreements over the collective history and culture of the group prevent a united identity crucial for ethnic mobilization. In addition, this fragmentation distorts the understanding of the group by the larger society. One community leader commented that in conversations with Georgian officials, the authorities thought that the Yezidis and Kurds were two completely different groups with absolutely nothing in common. As long as the minority faces difficulties in settling on one united name, its identity, and thus demands, it will increasingly be misunderstood by the country in which it wishes to assert itself.

### **Organizations and Political Ventures**

Sensing the changing political climate, Kurdish community leaders did come together in the late Soviet period to organize themselves into civil society organizations. The earliest appearance of such a group was the establishment of 'Ronai' in 1988 which brought together representatives from the Yezidi-Kurdish community. Struggles over leadership of this organization led to internal conflicts that lasted throughout the 1990s, depicted by the frequent renaming of the group: from 'Ronai' in 1988 to the 'Society of Kurdish Citizens in Georgia' in 1997, to finally the 'Union of

Yezidi-Kurds in Georgia' in 1998. Each name change signified the departure of a key leader who had previously aligned himself with this main organization, but then subsequently left over differences in leadership methods in order to found another organization. On the whole, these departures were not amicable, and even attempts to gather the adversarial leaders have not led to compromises or increased cooperation. To this date, several Yezidi-Kurdish organizations still operate in Georgia, ranging from cultural programming, Kurdish language classes, youth unions, women's rights, and political activities.

Several factors account for this lack of internal organization of the community. First, to explain current conflicts, it is important to review the treatment of Yezidi-Kurds during the Soviet Union period, at which time they received large amounts of state funding to organize cultural events, run a theatre, form dance ensembles, receive funding for the publishing of works by Kurdish authors, and broadcast a radio show in the Kurdish language every week. A slot on the Communist Party list was allotted to a member of the Yezidi-Kurdish community. Therefore, Yezidi-Kurdish leaders were accustomed to a high level of state support and many of these expectations have lingered into the post-Soviet period. Based on achieving a goal of entering party lists to achieve funding, there has been one Kurdish representative in Parliament since 1991, Mame Raiki (term 1995-1999), who succeeded in securing 50,000 GEL from 1998 to 1999 for the development of Yezidi-Kurdish culture. This precedent has had a major influence on later leaders who have seen the post of MP as a significant opportunity to secure the resources necessary to revive the community in Georgia.

The goal of a seat in Parliament and thus the increased political visibility of the Yezidi-Kurds require the consolidation of the Yezidi-Kurdish minority behind a single candidate. Various attempts by leaders have been made in recent years to depict themselves as the director of the largest Yezidi-Kurdish organization and thus representative of the larger minority population as a whole. These claims have been made in order to attract the attention of both Georgian political parties in order to secure spots on the party list, diaspora organizations in order to receive financial assistance, and officials and figures in Iraqi Kurdistan in order to develop connections between the two communities.

However, conflicting ambitions to be the single voice of the Yezidi-Kurdish community have resulted in increased clashes between leaders of the community. Several consequences have emerged as a result of such disorganization. As Mamuka Komakhia, a political analyst

specializing in minorities in Georgia, has written in the 2004 United Nations Association of Georgia (UNAG) report on the Yezidi-Kurds, the 2003 elections served as a prime example of the battles to represent the Yezidi-Kurdish community in the political field. Each of the Yezidi-Kurdish organizations backed a different political party, some finding allies in President Shevardnadze's "For a New Georgia" bloc, others in the "Democratic Revival Union" at the time in power in Ajara, and finally other with the "New Rights" oppositional party. However, this split within the preferences of the leading organizations could not secure each Yezidi-Kurdish candidate for Parliament a spot high enough on the party list to win a seat in Parliament. Through their disunity, the opportunity to represent the minority on a national level was put on hold for another five years.<sup>14</sup>

The obstacle of obtaining extra funding has not been alleviated through donations from Yezidi-Kurdish communities abroad. Due to cuts in state funding of minority activities under the democratic government of Georgia, most previous sources of money have all but dried up (save for the brief resumption during the tenure of MP Raiki). Without a genuine kin state to provide money from an operating state budget and embassies, Yezidi-Kurdish representatives do not have enough possible donors for resources badly needed for the building up of organizational capacity. Granted that the Yezidi-Kurdish diaspora is not very organized itself, the internal conflicts plaguing the minority in Georgia have also not helped this particular situation. Appeals for outside funding of, for example, religious events have not come to fruition, in large part due to a perceived image of the community as fragmented by organizations abroad.

Lastly, disputes between community leaders have also had an adverse effect on the younger generations. After years of life in independent Georgia and a sizeable Yezidi-Kurdish population still remaining, the next set of leaders has seen few tangible results from the multitude of organizations and projects that have been proposed. Disillusionment with the elders also leads to branching out into separate structures, and the cooperation has sometimes been quite tense between the generations, especially over goals and strategies.

Amidst the turmoil described above, one might only see negative characteristics about the state of Yezidi-Kurdish civil society. Nevertheless, several organizations still operate quite effectively, and a so-called 'bloc' of different groups works together quite cooperatively, even sharing office

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<sup>14</sup> United Nations Association of Georgia, "Kurdish Population in Georgia – January-November 2004 Assessment", *Country of Origin Information Reports* 1 (3)(Tbilisi, United Nations Association of Georgia), 2004.

space. Younger leaders are still committed to building effective representative organs. Looking abroad more for help from international organizations, some community leaders are starting to design projects and put forth proposals that expand beyond the 'Kurdish' question in Georgia, which is unlikely to attract major support from international donors. Still, as certain Yezidi-Kurdish organizations function independently of each other and rifts are still present between leaders, the prospects for a completely aligned community are bleak.

### **Effects of the Processes of Assimilation at Work in Georgia**

The decline of the Yezidi-Kurdish community in Georgia can also be attributed to both covert and quiet processes of assimilation occurring in the past 15 years. The emphasis placed on the idea of 'Georgianess' has not completely dissipated since the nationalist fervor under Gamsakhurdia. For a variety of reasons, many Yezidi-Kurds are shedding their inborn identity and exhibiting more ethnically Georgian characteristics. The strict, endogamous nature of the Yezidi-Kurdish community makes it impossibly difficult for members to embrace certain aspects of the Georgian identity, such as religion or entering mixed marriages, and remain at the same time part of the minority group. This section will focus on Georgian state policies and societal trends that have dismantled core components of the Yezidi-Kurdish identity and led to the accelerating assimilation of Yezidi-Kurds.<sup>15</sup>

A trend towards conversion to other religions has emerged among the younger generations of Yezidi-Kurds in recent years. The prominent place of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian society has led religion in many respects to become a central component of Georgian national identity. Although rhetorically a 'civic' nationalism is being developed in Georgia to provide space for the multitude of national minorities residing in the country, in the establishment an elevated, state-supported platform for the Orthodox Church, the choice of retaining one's own separate religion and adopting the Georgian identity is becoming more and more exclusive.<sup>16</sup> Attitudes towards the cohabitation of different religions in Georgia seem to confirm support for

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<sup>15</sup> Whether or not these processes of assimilation are explicitly intentional will not be discussed here. However, community leaders have expressed concern over the Georgian government's reluctance to address minorities' complaints and requests to change policies.

<sup>16</sup> "Georgian Leadership Contender Stresses Ethnic Inclusiveness" Public Television of Armenia. BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit (December 1, 2003).

the exclusive role for the Georgian Orthodox Church at expense of lesser groups vying for a secure future of their faith in Georgia.<sup>17</sup>

From religious teaching appearing in public schools to the high exposure of Orthodox priests in public life, the importance of the religion to the country is apparent, strengthened by a controversial agreement between the Georgian government and the Georgian Orthodox Church. In October 2002, a Concordat was signed between the two parties, “granting the Church some approval authority over state school textbooks, the construction of religious buildings, and the publication of religious literature by other religious groups.”<sup>18</sup> Following the signing, classes in Orthodox religion classes have been introduced in Georgian public schools, although their voluntary nature has been disputed.<sup>19</sup> Some of the clauses were softened in 2005 under a new agreement, including the separation of religious teaching from state schools.

For young Yezidi-Kurds growing up in modern Georgia, the attraction to the modern religion is quite strong, partly due to the above mentioned developments between the state and the Church. With little knowledge of Yezidi traditions due to the infrequent visits of spiritual leaders, young Yezidi-Kurds see few visible signs of their religion. Individuals of the community have commented on the current ‘popularity’ of the Georgian Orthodox Church as a decisive motivating factor in the conversion. However, behind closed doors, Yezidi-Kurds also talk about the effects of quiet proselytism by the Orthodox Church, sometimes even through offers of financial assistance to Yezidi-Kurds in exchange for converting. Therefore, through the declining strength of the Yezidi faith and prominence of the Georgian Orthodox Church in society, Yezidi-Kurds in Georgia are converting to Orthodoxy, and in essence crippling the ethnic community.

Finally, the use of Kurdish language is also steadily declining among members of the community. The need to find employment, whether in Georgia or in Russia, has increased the importance of Georgian and Russian at the expense of the Kurdish language. The language is extremely infrequently spoken in public spaces, and as young Yezidi-Kurds begin to attend Russian and Georgian schools in the bigger cities, even within the home, much of the communication is done

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<sup>17</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and United Nations Association of Georgia, *Religious Minorities in Georgia 2007*, Country of Origin Information (Geneva and Tbilisi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and United Nations Association of Georgia), 2007.

<sup>18</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom May 2007* (Washington, D.C., United States Commission on International Religious Freedom), 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Felix Corley, “GEORGIA: Voluntary ‘Religion and Culture’ Classes Compulsory, Parents Complain” Forum 18 News Service, November 2003, 19, at [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=188](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=188).



in a language other than Kurdish. Most of the younger generation of Yezidi-Kurds also cannot write the language. Since most of the mass media outlets were closed during the 1990s, Yezidi-Kurdish youth have few opportunities to practice besides with older generations. The continued teaching of Kurmanji is one more issue the Kurdish community needs to promote, but due to a lack of financial resources and the absence of Kurdish in any school curriculum, the obstacles are significant.

### **The Construction of a Temple/Cultural Centre**

A main issue over the past few years within the community has been the construction of a Yezidi-Kurdish cultural centre in the outskirts of Tbilisi. The idea was proposed in the late 1990s as a way to create a place for community and religious gatherings, and architectural designs were even drawn up. Unfortunately, a variety of disputes have put the project on hold indefinitely, although most community leaders claim that the possibility of its realization still exists. The dispute and problems facing the construction illustrate the conjecture of the three sets of overall factors listed above which hinder the ethnic mobilization and proper integration of the Yezidi-Kurdish ethnic group in Georgia.

First, a lack of resources stemming from the economic crises of the 1990s and the massive out-migration has been a primary obstacle in beginning construction on the church. Attempts have been made to gather finances from individuals within the community through private donations, but have not been realized due to other subsistence demands placed on members of the minorities living in Georgia. Although none of the community representatives interviewed would point at money as the sole determining factor behind the delays and frustrations over the temple, it can not be denied that the securing of adequate funding may mitigate the other tensions surrounding its construction.

On the other hand, several leaders have pointed to internal conflicts as the real source of the delay. A lack of funding has been cited as a reason first off, as the organizations involved have failed to push the issue with the average Yezidi-Kurd in order to gain his/her financial support. Another organization leader stated that the funding was in place and the plans were ready to go, but disagreements arose over the purpose of the cultural centre. According to Yezidi religious tradition, there can only be one religious site on Earth, that being Lalish near Mosul, Iraq. During the planning meetings, discussions centred on the interpretation of the religion, as some leaders

wanted the new centre to also hold religious rituals. Others objected, and the project as a whole stalled.

One obstacle to the Yezidi-Kurdish project can also be found outside the minority within the close partnership between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the state. Under the concordant signed in 2002, the Georgian Orthodox Church reserves the right to approve any construction of religious buildings on the territory of Georgia. Several cases have emerged where the Georgian Orthodox Church has been accused of inciting mobs and moving against other faiths attempting to build. The state has remained quiet through these conflicts, and has not helped the situation through tight registration laws that force non-Orthodox communities to register as nonprofit entities, something many do not desire to do, in order to begin construction.<sup>20</sup> Yezidi-Kurd leaders have become entangled in these difficulties in their own attempts to go forward with its project and expressed their dismay over meetings with city officials, which they believe failed due to pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church.<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The problems currently facing the Yezidi-Kurdish minority leave little room for hope about the future of the community in Georgia. However, one aspect not to be underestimated remains the continued commitment of many community members to life in Georgia and simultaneously the preservation of Yezidi-Kurdish customs and identity. The test of their efforts will be first seen within the political sphere, as the possible election of a deputy to the Georgian Parliament does hold the prospects for the securing of the much-needed resources for increased organizational and cultural activity. However, in order to achieve that aim, concerted steps needed to be taken to align the various organizations behind one candidate and pool their resources to make the remaining Yezidi-Kurds a recognizable voting bloc that might attract the attention of a national party. To overcome the economic pressures to out-migrate and the societal pressures to assimilate (both culturally and religiously), Yezidi-Kurds must achieve a verifiable level of internal unity and look to existing minority civil society structures to expand their influence alongside the numerous minorities confronted with similar threats in present day Georgia.

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<sup>20</sup> Felix Corley, "GEORGIA: 'Orchestrated reaction' against religious minorities' buildings" Forum 18 News Service, October, 2006, 25 at [http://forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=861](http://forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=861).

<sup>21</sup> Felix Corley, "GEORGIA: Why Can't Minority Faiths Build Places of Worship?" Forum 18 News Service, November, 2003, 14 at [http://forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=184](http://forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=184).

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